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STUDIES

A Special Report Series by
THE STATE CENTER FOR HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL STATISTICS
P.O. Box 29538, Raleigh, N.C. 27626-0538

No. 96

August 1995

CESAREAN SECTIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA, 1988-1993

by

Kathryn B. McLawhorn

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AUG 31 1995

ABSTRACT

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Cesarean sections are the most frequently performed surgical operation in the United States (Elson, 1994). The inclusion of method of delivery on North Carolina's birth certificate in 1988 allows the examination of trends in cesarean section rates during the 6-year period 1988-1993. This study includes an analysis of many birth characteristics and their relationship to method of delivery. Cesarean sections in this report include primary and repeat.

A cesarean section involves an incision through the abdominal and uterine walls for delivery of the infant and the placenta. Physicians perform this surgery for four common reasons: previous cesarean, dystocia (abnormal progress of labor), breech position (feet or buttocks positioned to come out first), and fetal distress (e.g., insufficient oxygen, unstable heart rate). In 1988, when method of delivery was first reported on North Carolina birth certificates, the cesarean section rate was 25.1 percent. In 1993, this rate had dropped slightly to 22.4. The highest numbers of cesarean sections occurred to women who were white, married, ages 25-29, had a high school education, and had single babies with normal birthweights (similar to the pattern for all live births). Groups with the highest percentage of live births delivered by cesarean section were whites, ages 40 and older, those with college education or beyond, and those having babies weighing less than 1500 grams.

Although cesarean sections are commonly performed, literature about them suggests that they often are performed unnecessarily. In addition to examining the data on current trends and characteristics, this report also discusses the increasing influence that VBAC (vaginal birth after previous cesarean delivery) and other factors have had on efforts to reduce overall cesarean rates.

